

Ethical issues surrounding e-gambling data collection

Online gambling data collection is becoming a focus of interest for various stakeholders in the online gaming industry, since it is relevant for advertising, attracting new players, exploring new markets and trying out new products. Mark Griffiths, of Nottingham Trent University, and Monica Whitty, of the University of Leicester, give an overview of some of the ethical issues raised by data collection in the gaming industry and research undertaken in the gambling studies field.

The ethics of online data collection by the gambling industry

It has been reported that one of the potential concerns surrounding internet gambling is the way that online gambling websites can collect large amounts of data about the gambler and the extent to which this is an invasion of the gambler's privacy'. For instance, internet gamblers provide tracking data for online gambling companies that can be used to compile customer profiles. Such data can tell online gambling companies exactly how online gamblers are spending their time in any given financial transaction - which games they are gambling on, for how long and how much money they are spending. The companies argue that this information can help in the retention of customers, and can also link up with existing customer databases and operating loyalty schemes. However, it has been argued that many online gamblers are unknowingly passing on information about themselves and that this raises serious questions about the gradual erosion of online gamblers' privacy.

Using sophisticated software, gaming companies can tailor their service to the gambler's known interests. However, there is a very fine line between providing what the online gambler wants and when the player is exploited. When joining an online gambling site, gamblers supply lots of information such as their name, address, date of birth, gender etc. Arguably, online gaming companies know more about the gamblers' playing behaviour than the gamblers themselves. Furthermore, they can send the gamblers offers and redemption vouchers or complimentary accounts, for example.

The gaming industry claims that

all of these things are introduced to enhance customer experience. However, it has been argued that the more unscrupulous operators will be able to entice known problem gamblers back onto their premises with tailored freebies such as the inducement of 'free' bets in the case of internet gambling. It could therefore be argued that the introduction of internet gambling has come at a price, and that price is arguably an invasion of the gambler's privacy.

However, it has also been argued that the data collected by online gambling companies could be used in a different way. More specifically, experts in problem gambling have been recommending to gaming companies that they should start using their large behavioural tracking data sets to help identify problem gamblers rather than 'exploit' them, and share the data with academics. If gaming companies can use behavioural tracking to learn more about their clientele, there is no reason why social science researchers could not adopt the same practice in carrying out their research.

There are, of course, many other advantages of the use of observational tracking data for research purposes. The data provide a record of events and can be revisited after the event itself has finished. Furthermore, several members of a research team can be used to gain different perspectives, to compare notes on, for example, excessive play, and/or to gauge inter-observer reliability. Additionally, the problem of finding suitable online gambling participants and whether or not they want to be included in a study is instantly overcome as the method provides an immediate data set if access is granted by the gaming company. They do not even have to travel to participate in

the study. However, the participants are unaware that they are even participating in a study and this raises issues around informed consent, which will be discussed further below.

The ethics of online data collection by gambling researchers

Researchers in the gambling studies field are starting to use online methods to gather their data, rather than traditional offline research approaches. There is a number of reasons why the online medium is a good place to conduct research with online gamblers. This is because the internet:

- is usually accessible to these gamblers, and they are usually proficient in using it;
- allows for studies to be administered to potentially large scale samples quickly and efficiently;
- can facilitate automated data inputting allowing large scale samples to be administered at a fraction of the cost and time of 'pen and paper' equivalents;
- has a disinhibiting effect on users and reduces social desirability, leading to increased levels of honesty, and therefore higher validity in the case of self-report;
- has potentially a global pool of participants, therefore researchers are able to study extreme and uncommon behaviours as well as make cross-cultural comparisons;
- provides access to 'socially unskilled' individuals who may not have taken part in the research if it was offline;
- can aid participant recruitment through advertising on various bulletin boards and websites; and
- can aid researchers because they do not have to be in the same geographical location as either the participants or fellow research colleagues.

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Arguably, the most important issues regarding the ethics of conducting online research into internet gambling include informed consent, deception and private versus public space. Informed consent requires researchers to be honest and open about the aims of their research and how they are going to be utilised the data they collect. Although informed consent can easily be obtained online for online surveys, there is much debate over whether it is required when people collect data using postings on public online forums.

Confidentiality is also a major concern given that many online surveys are hosted on insecure sites. Cultural issues have also been a concern for researchers. Online surveys give researchers the opportunity to collect larger samples, but at what cost? The collection of data from ethically diverse samples may sometimes make research findings more difficult to interpret.

The issue of deception has been noted as a serious ethical concern for online researchers, particularly if the researcher poses as a member of the group under investigation - for example, he is identified by others as an online gambler rather than as a researcher. Not letting the people under investigation know that a researcher is present is generally seen as unacceptable, especially given the fact there are other more ethical ways to collect data.

This practice of letting participants know that a researcher is present in the online environment has been adopted by gambling researchers - particularly cyber-ethnographers - and has been outlined. However, in online behavioural tracking, this is not really an issue as the data are almost always amassed without the need for researcher intervention.

Another concern that is more unique to studying online interactions is the perception of the space where the data is collected. Although online interactions in an internet gambling forum or gambling website are often observed by many other people, the person online may not perceive their interactions as public. A public space is much more obvious in face-to-face settings. We argue that although interactions take place online in public spaces, this does not mean that the intended audience is a social science researcher. In relation to sensitive issues such as problem gambling, they warn that researchers need to think about how the participant would feel if they were included in their studies without giving any consent.

Some social scientists have opted to play the role of lurker (being a passive observer in a chat room or discussion group) for the purposes of collecting participant data. However, respecting a participant's right to privacy is a basic ethical requirement of any social science study. This issue becomes more complicated when studying online gamblers in online environments. In general, the rule of thumb is that researchers should only observe people in a situation where they would ordinarily expect to be observed, such as a public space. However, in cyberspace, these boundaries become blurred, as it is often difficult to ascertain what exactly is a public domain and what is a private domain. Social researchers need to seriously consider if they have the right to 'lurk' in online settings in order to learn more about the activities they are investigating. In relation to online gambling research, ethical concerns have been raised for cyber-ethnographers studying online poker players by accessing

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online poker forums.

Social science researchers need to acknowledge that there are many types of online environments and that some may be deemed more public or private than others. For example, a chat room or an online poker forum might be deemed a more public space than, for example, email. This is a crucial ethical concern that should not be dismissed and it would be arrogant for social science researchers to debate this issue amongst themselves without consulting the individuals who inhabit the particular web spaces. While there is no definitive answer, the way forward is to begin questioning the nature of this space. To this end, it is argued that lurking in public newsgroups might be ethically questionable.

If researchers are to make divisions between private and public spaces online, the demarcations are not always obvious. For instance, is an online support group for gamblers - that can be accessed by anyone online - a public or a private space? The internet can give an individual a sense of privacy and anonymity. If it is concluded that online spaces are public spaces, the anonymity they afford can give the illusion that these are private spaces. Therefore, should researchers ethically take advantage of online users' false sense of privacy and security? Is it ethically justifiable to lurk in these sites and collect data without the knowledge or consent of the individuals who inhabit these sites?

It is probably best to assume that people are not aware of others'

presence unless they make themselves explicitly known to them, at which point the situation becomes public, unless those being studied are under the impression that they are in a private correspondence with the researcher. In other words, the perceptions of the participant define the domain as public or private, rather than the physicality of the situation.

Conclusion

Online data methods in all their varieties tend to provide a cost-efficient way of gathering online gambling data that can have many benefits for both researchers and their study participants. Online gamblers' familiarity with internet technology - whether they have problems or not - may facilitate and enhance such studies being undertaken. The most salient problems that online researchers in the gambling studies field are likely to face concern ethical issues (informed consent, deception, public versus private spaces and lurking). Despite such ethical dilemmas, these are not insurmountable and can be remedied if careful thought and rationale is provided.

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